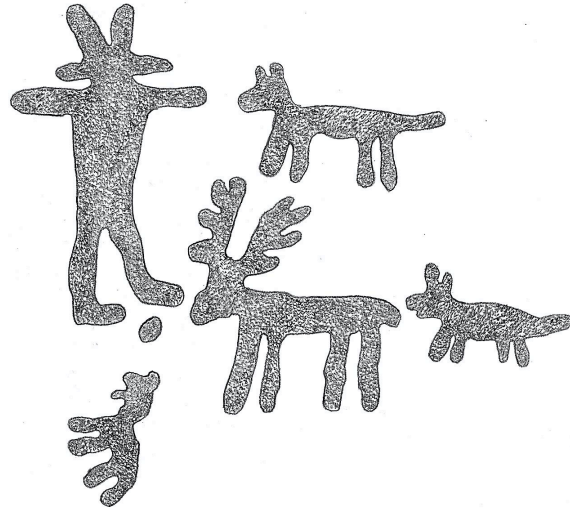
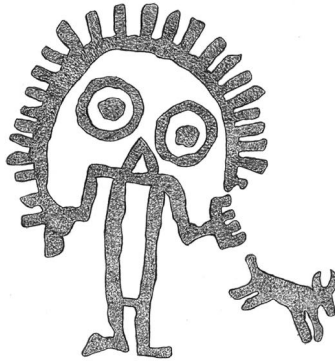


When Animals Talk

Thomas Doty



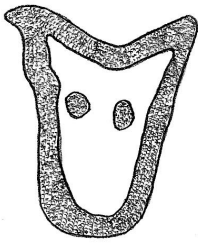
When Animals Talk



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



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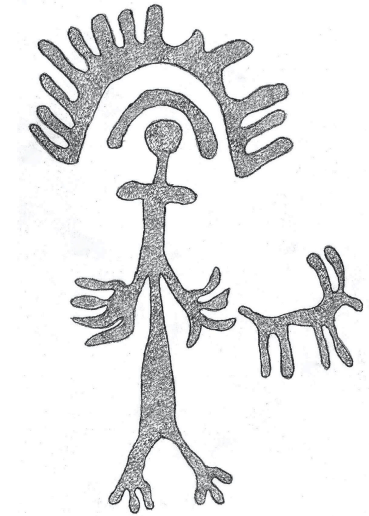
This story was commissioned by
The High Desert Museum (Bend, OR)

Cover photo and drawings by Thomas Doty
Back cover photo by Melani Marx

A museum is a theatre where stories strive not to be lost. Stories play their parts in indoor exhibits on history and culture and landscape, and outdoors along paths that lead to homesteads, to the nests of raptors and the lairs of critters. In different scenes of times and places, we hear stories from diverse folks who call at least one of these settings their home.

Stories thrive in a dawn-lit Paiute camp, in the shadowy workings of an ore mine, and in the salmon-soaked spray of Celilo Falls. In pools edged with bulrushes and cattails and crowded with trout, in the shade of junipers and pines, in sizzling landscapes of sun and sage and basalt, stories are staged all around us. If we listen carefully, we carry them home in our memories and they visit us in our dreams.

When many stories are told on the same stage, they interact. They give us a sense of what was once here and who walked these paths before us. They talk to each other and create new versions. Stories give us a glimpse of what we might find outside the theatre, and around the next bend in the trail.



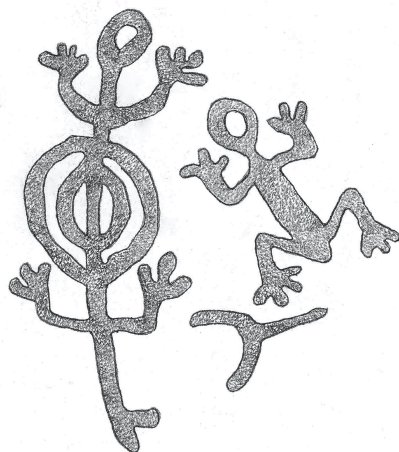
I love stories. So does my mythic friend Coyote, who is especially fond of stories about himself that make him look good. When Coyote heard that the museum had displayed him in their Hall of Plateau Indians as a brainy symbol of survival and a brilliant master of adaptation — he truly believed they meant him personally — he begged me to take him along on my next visit, and I gave in.

Here is where the adventure begins, on a sunny day in September, as late afternoon shadows stretch across the high desert landscape....

Outside the museum entrance I turn to Coyote and ask, “Did you know that there was a time when animals and people were not so different?”

“Hmmm....” says Coyote. “I’m glad we critters did some evolving.”

“Very funny,” I say. “I mean that there was a time when you critters and we humans spoke the same language.”



“It’s hard to imagine that at some distant time in the slow evolution of humans, you and I might have actually had this quaint little chat.”

“What I’m getting at is that it could have happened in real time rather than in this story.”

“You mean there’s a difference?” asks Coyote. “Are you saying this story isn’t real and neither of us actually exist? Silly you! I feel real enough, even if you don’t. I’m not just any dumb beast, you know. Hmpff! And you call yourself a storyteller!”

"Never mind."

"I rarely do."

“All right,” I say. “It really doesn’t matter. Besides, too many facts get in the way of a good story, right?”

“Right.”

As the two of us walk into the museum, Coyote bugs out his eyes and does an animated dance with all four legs crossed. He says in his best puppy voice, “Where’s the little boy’s room? Though I am officially only a mythic figment of your storyteller imagination, I really need to go!” Coyote giggles as he scampers through the building, past the restrooms and out the doors toward the animal exhibits.

It doesn’t take long before Coyote is amused by signs that announce the times for talks by museum interpreters. Each talk focuses on an animal living at the museum. Coyote recites out loud to himself, “Porcupine Talks, Otter Talks....” He pauses to muse. “Now that’s something I’d like to see. Imagine shapely Miss Otter standing behind a podium and telling her intimate secrets to an enthralled audience who can’t believe what they’re seeing or what they’re hearing. Otter Talks, indeed! Of course it would be a step back in evolution for critters to talk in the primitive way that humans talk, but hey, it might be fun!”

“What might be fun?” I ask, jumping out of my own thoughts. But too late. Coyote gets a whiff of something that interests one of his doggy appetites, and he makes a beeline down the pathway and disappears into the woods.

I glance at my watch. “Great,” I sigh. “The museum closes in a few minutes and Mister Follow–His–Nose has gone off somewhere, probably chasing after that cute otter. Oh, boy, he’ll be in for a surprise. There’s more to that one than antics and coyote tricks.”

I whistle for Coyote as I walk the pathways, searching and searching. I bushwhack through sage and rabbitbrush, searching more and more. I come back to the main path, and notice the lack of other folks. While I was out of sight, the grounds keeper didn’t see me as she did her last sweep of the grounds. On her way out, she locked the doors and bolted the entrance.

I rattle a few gates. It doesn’t take long for me to figure out that I am on the wrong side of the fence. And, I’m thinking, so is Mister Long–Nosed Coyote.

“Imagine this,” I whisper. “Me and the canine critter are in the same cage. And it’s getting dark. Well, this seems real enough.”

Coyote shows up out of nowhere, sits down next to me, and says, “I didn’t know the place was going to get all locked up.”

“I know.”

“What’ll we do now? Wait until morning?”

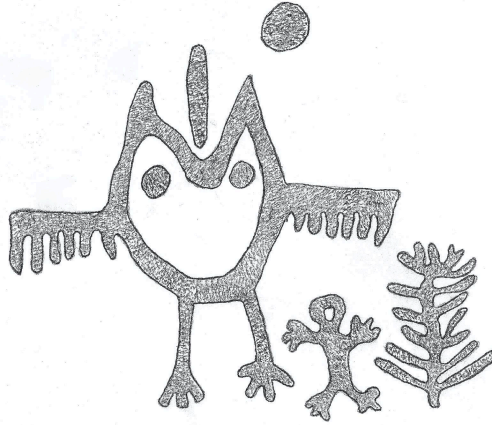
“I guess.”

“Guess what?”

“Never mind.”

“Right.”

Nighttime is Mythtime, and everything changes. Perceptions shift. Imaginations blaze. Walls fall away. In moonlight at the museum, stories draw breath and live their lives, as if the wish of the museum to become what it represents has been granted, at least until sunrise. Creeks swell into rivers, ponds into lakes. A small grove of trees grows into a vast forest. Electric lights flare into fires and push the uneasy mystery of darkness away from where folks live and dream. Exhibits swell into native villages. The Otter People live down by the lake. The Porcupine People make their home on a hilltop ridge of rocks and pines. In this nighttime world, burrowing owls are known as the Rollhead Owl People. They speak rarely, but when they do, each word makes the sound of a myth, and many words create a prophecy. Around fires in each village, close to the flames, all kinds of people sit spellbound as stories take over the night.



This was the sound that caught our attention ... whispered words from a distant glimmer of light, so soft at first they might be spoken by the Grass People as their shadows dance and sway in the night breeze.

Coyote whispers, "Something's a little different around here."

"No kidding," I say.

"I never do."

"Right."

Coyote and I walk a path along the river, downriver past swirls and riffles, rapids and waterfalls, to where the river widens into a great lake. The whispers of words grow into the sounds of many conversations from many people. On the lakeshore, at the village of the Otter People, we join a crowd of critters. Coyote notices Otter Woman right away, and watches her as she puts on a mask of herself as an old lady.

"Well," says Coyote. "It seems there's more to this girl than what I first sniffed."

"That's the way it is," I say. "There's always more."

Voices stop as everyone watches Otter Woman. She moves among the people, dancing circles around the fire. She stops and speaks, slowly at first as if her voice is trying to remember something from long, long ago, then building into words that strive to command this night and all others....

I am the daughter of Kulta, but I am an old woman now, and my father has journeyed beyond where I can follow. I grew up on an island in this lake that my father built for his family. He made deep holes under the water for each of his children where we could watch the fish. We traveled on underwater trails. This was a good life.

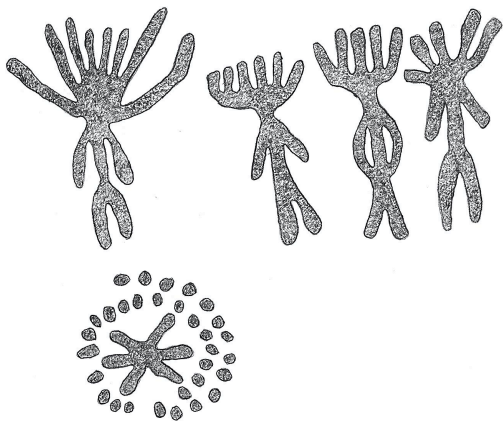
But back in the old days, when my father was young, he lived with his friend Gaukos, here in this village. Across the lake lived the ten frog sisters. They were like I used to be, beautiful women. Their clothes sparkled with beads and porcupine quills. They were powerful young women. They could do anything they wanted. Another frog woman lived with the ten sisters. She was big and ugly, and the only thing she could do was to bring people back to life. The ten sisters weren't interested in such things. They called her Ugly Green Frog Woman.

Gaukos grew lonesome. He was tired of living in the world. My father told him, "I will go and tell the ten sisters that you want a wife. With a woman to cook for us, you won't be lonesome."

Isn't that just the way some men think? But my father was young and didn't know much yet.

My father went to the ten sisters, and he said, "A young man on the east side of the lake wants one of you for a wife, but he doesn't know which one."

The ten sisters got ready to travel across the lake. They cooked tender roots and pounded sweet seeds. They put on new moccasins and dresses, pulled their canoe into the water, and started. Ugly Green Frog Woman had nothing to cook. She wore an old basket cap with holes in it, and her clothes were in tatters. But she went along to paddle the canoe. The sisters kept pushing her. "Paddle faster, ugly thing! Paddle faster!"



Gaukos sat on the rocks where he could watch for the sisters. When they reached land, they left the canoe one by one and walked past him. Gaukos told the first girl, "Not you. Another." He said the same thing to the second girl. And the third. And to each of the sisters. Finally, they shrugged and climbed back into the canoe.

Kulta took Gaukos aside and said, "Tell me which one you want."

"The one at the end of the canoe."

“Why do you want that ugly thing?” asked Kulta. “You should take one of those nice girls. That one didn’t even bring anything to eat!”

“I will take the one I know will be best for me, the one that will live in my heart and always save me.”

“Don’t take that Ugly Green Frog Woman,” said Kulta.

“I don’t want to live around here any more,” said Gaukos. “Every night, I see some of the big-mouthed Bear People. They are watching me. They like to eat such men as I am. They make themselves into clouds and sneak up on me and bite me. And I am tired of it.”

“How can Ugly Green Frog Woman save you?”

“If there should be only a little bit of me left in a bear’s mouth, she will bring me back to life.”

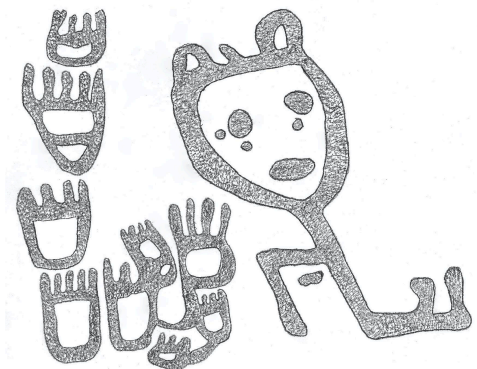
My father thought about this, and finally agreed. He motioned to Ugly Green Frog Woman to join them. She crept along the edge of the canoe but each sister pinched and scratched her as she passed. They made her arms and legs bleed.

Gaukos wiped the blood off. He rubbed her with deer tallow, and gave her a rabbit skin blanket. He lifted her up and put her close to his heart. He whispered to her, “I will call you Beautiful Frog Woman.”

As they left, Gaukos said to my father, “You will see me every month. I shall live always and I will forever travel the sky.”

These days, people look to the sky and call Gaukos the moon. People also see Beautiful Frog Woman in the heart of the moon. Sometimes they see Beautiful Frog Woman’s children near her.

Each month clouds gather around the moon and Gaukos gets eaten up by the big-mouthed Bear People. But Frog Woman brings him back to life. She always will, as long as Gaukos carries her in his heart.



As my father grew older, he told this story to me and my sisters, over and over. “Don’t settle for a man who was like me when I was young,” he told us. “Find someone like Gaukos. Look to the moon and dream.”

I am an old woman now. When I was young I looked everywhere for a man. I dressed in fancy clothes. Men came around, but no one seemed just right. One night, I looked to the moon. I threw away my fancy things, and I found a man who made his home in my heart. I am an old woman now, and my life is made mostly of memories and stories, but they are good ones, and I pass their wisdoms along to you.

Otter Woman removes her mask and she is young again. She begins to dance near the fire. Her eyes sparkle in the firelight. There is a playfulness about her dance, but also a depth of movement that is deliberate and enticing. Other women join her dance. Several young men look confused and glance nervously at each other. They slip away from the fire, scratching their heads.

Coyote elbows me and says, “Let’s get out of here!”

As we walk back upriver, I ask, “Well, what do you think of Otter Woman now?”

“Not my type,” says Coyote. “I’m more into party girls. Intellectuals make me jumpy.”

“Some things never change,” I say.

“Right,” says Coyote.

“That’s what I said,” I say.

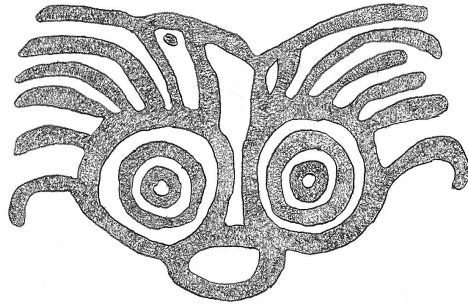
Coyote and I walk into the village of the Porcupine People. Porcupine Old Man is speaking to a crowd of younger porcupines....

Now you’ve got to be careful of Coyote. He’s a tricky one. He always wants something he doesn’t need, and he can never get everything that he wants, or so he thinks.

I remember when I was a whipper-snapper of a youngster, and my grandfather would tell us about the time he met Coyote. Grandfather was wise beyond belief, and he moved slowly, and cautiously, and he made a sound when he moved.... Qoobin ... qoobin ... qoobin.... Coyote was neither wise nor slow nor cautious, but he’d like to think that he was smart.

Grandpa was sitting in the shade of a juniper putting the finishing touches on his new tule slippers. He slipped some moss inside to make them soft against the sharp reeds, and he went for a walk. Qoobin ... qoobin ... qoobin.... It was a short walk but it took him a long time. Qoobin ...

qoobin ... qoobin.... He ambled across a snow drift. Qoobin ... qoobin ... qoobin.... And he slowly walked home. Qoobin ... qoobin ... qoobin....



Now Coyote was also out walking around looking for something—he didn't know what, and he saw Grandpa's tracks. He said to himself, "Now those are beautiful tracks. I wish I could make tracks like that." And he kept walking, following the tracks, until he came upon Grandfather Porcupine sitting under his juniper.

"Grandfather," said Coyote, trying to sound respectful. "Are these your tracks?"

"Yes, mister. Those are my tracks...."

I close my eyes. I see pictures that walk with the words of the story. Time after time Coyote grabs for what he cannot have, ignoring the richness of what surrounds him. He swaps shoes with Porcupine, but his new slippers hurt his feet and his tracks turn bloody. He whines to have his old moccasins back. He and Porcupine run a race for them. Coyote stops to gobble plums and cherries. He loses the race. Wise with purpose, and as slow as the passing of centuries, Grandfather Porcupine plods through the story. Qoobin ... qoobin ... qoobin.... There is a fire, a wind to blow the smoke away, and the story ends. I open my eyes to silence. Coyote and me are alone in the early morning shadows.

We stand at the edge of the forest, watching huge eyes stare back at us. In the growing light, a head is added to the eyes, and we see Rollhead Owl. For centuries, her voice has been the last sound before sunrise. Sometimes she speaks the names of those who are about to die. At other times, she sings the oldest songs anyone can remember. The people of this place listen carefully to what she has to say. She is a watcher. She knows the patterns of the past and what lies ahead.

“There is a different day coming,” she whispers. “The Tree People and the Rock People tremble. Look beyond the villages of my relations to what is left of the night. Beyond the Paiute camp, there is a cabin and a sawmill and a mine. And beyond that, the grandfather of all coyotes dances from story to story, He gets killed a lot but he never dies. Even with his foolishness, that one has a dance worth learning.”

Rollhead Owl walks into the forest. She looks like a head rolling along the ground as if she has tossed off her arms and legs and moves with the lightness of one who has few burdens. Coyote and I walk back along the creek and into the museum.



Later that morning, the grounds keeper comes across me stretched out on a bench near the Hall of Plateau Indians, snoozing away. She wakes me up and I explain what has happened. We both hear snoring coming from inside the exhibit. As we walk past the summer tipi, we peer inside. No Coyote, only evidence that he was there. The “All-American” ice chest has been emptied of its goodies. Several soda cans and candy wrappers are scattered across the tule mats and Pendleton blankets. We walk on and find water on the floor near the Celilo Falls fish tank. Coyote’s tracks lead deeper into the exhibit as if Mister Hungry Pooch had made a reckless detour in an attempt to get a sweet meal of Kokanee salmon. We walk on to the 1960s reservation house. Still no Coyote, but his path is clear. A black and white TV murmurs reruns of “The Lone Ranger.” On the floor are two more empty soda cans. Finally, at the exit, there’s the culprit, coiled happily into a doggy ball and snoring away beneath a plaque entitled “Coyote’s People”....

“Faced with pressures to conform or become living stereotypes, the Indians of the Columbia River Plateau became tricksters, like their traditional character Coyote. Instead of giving up their identity, they developed the ability to change their forms so they could live between two very distinctive and always changing worlds.”

“Well,” says the grounds keeper. “This is fitting for such a pooch.”

“You have no idea,” I say. “Two worlds, eh? I wonder...”

Coyote and I walk out of the museum toward the parking lot. Coyote stops and glances back.

“Strange....” he says.

“What’s that?”

“Things seem smaller when humans show up. You see the forest just beyond that building?

Wasn’t it bigger last night?”

“Hmmm....” I say. “I’m not sure. Everything looks a little different in the daytime.”

“We should stick around for a spell. Maybe until the first snow?”

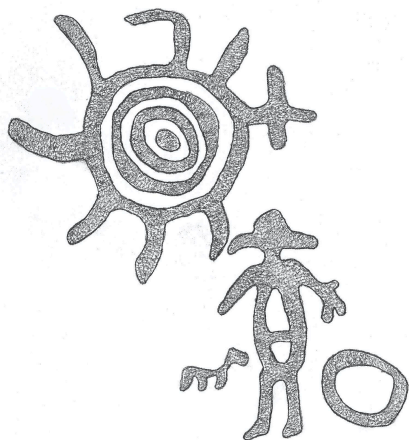
“Think so?”

“We might have another look at that forest. Someone ought to. And I’m sure there’s a fabulous story about me in there somewhere.”

“Right.”

“Of course I am,” says Coyote.

“Right again.”



Coyote and I walk into the parking lot, climb into my rig, recline the seats and soon we are snoozing, dreaming of stories. Hundreds of folks park their cars, walk past us into the museum, and out again. The sun travels the sky. Birds change their songs from morning to afternoon. By the time we wake up, long shadows stretch across the landscape and the parking lot is nearly empty. Just before closing time, Coyote yips and yelps in delight as we make a desperate dash for the entrance.

“One of the best of Oregon’s storytellers!”

“A cultural treasure.” — “A master of his art.”



Thomas Doty is a native storyteller. Since 1981, he has traveled the countryside performing traditional and original stories. He learned his art and native cultural traditions from elders, including listening to Grandma Maude, the family storyteller. Doty was born in southern Oregon where he still lives. He is descended from Irish and English settlers who settled in the Rogue Valley in the 1800s, and has family connections to Takelma and Shasta ancestors of the region.

He is the co-founder and co-director of Reading the Rocks, and the author of several books, including *Doty Meets Coyote*, a collection of 40 traditional and original native stories published in 2016 by Blackstone Publishing. His stories have been broadcast on Public Radio, and he is the recipient of a Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award from the national American Indian Program.

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